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Troops turned teachers tackle challenge

Cecilia Chan

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Science teacher Gene Noel handed out straws and instructed his eighth-grade students to breathe through them with their mouths while viewing a three-minute video on tobacco's effect on the body.

This, the Peoria resident said, demonstrates a smoker's shortness of breath after smoking one to three packs of cigarettes a day.

Noel, a Vietnam veteran, is back in the trenches. This time he is a teacher at a Phoenix school serving low-income students, having left a 24-year Air Force career handling weapon systems.

Noel is one of the more than 8,400 former military personnel who since 1994 have switched to jobs at deprived schools under the Troops to Teachers program. The federal program helps cover teacher certification costs and pays bonuses to those who teach in schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged students.

"I retired on a Friday and the next Monday I walked right into a classroom," said Noel, 51, who embarked on his second career in 2000 and now teaches in the predominantly Hispanic Kings Ridge School, near 67th Avenue and Lower Buckeye Road.

"This is where the action is, the trenches of education," he said.

Noel, who is working on his doctorate in education, also teaches language arts and tutors in English and writing. And, after no teacher volunteered for the job, he took on the teaching of life skills, cooking and sewing as a home economics elective. He also helps teachers use technology effectively in the classroom and is one of three curriculum coordinators for the school.

"It's absolutely worth it," said Noel, who took a 50 percent pay cut when he retired as a master sergeant at Luke Air Force Base to teach. "Money is not the motivation. It's my fulfillment of a dream, where I can make a difference in the community and make a difference in the lives of kids."

Noel inspires his students to look beyond just getting out of school and to shoot for college or consider the military as an option.

Noel said he uses both his Army sons as examples to the class. Shawn is scheduled for his second deployment to Iraq in July, and Daniel, Noel an X-ray technician at John C. Lincoln Hospital, is in the Army Reserve.

Noel said Daniel's military training prepared him for his job.

Citlalli Hernandez, 14, said Noel is strict but is patient when explaining things to the class.

"He's a good teacher," she said. "I've learned a lot from him."

Noel said his military background enables him to handle challenges in the classroom that would boggle a novice teacher.

"What I brought to the job was organization, leadership and classroom discipline," he said.

A 2005 publication from the National Center for Education Information indicated that Troops teachers view problems such as testing requirements, extra duties, discipline and class size as less serious than teachers in general. And Troops teachers, more than public school teachers, believe all children can learn at the highest levels of achievement.

"I wish I could get more Troops to Teachers because of their discipline, their focus on pedagogy, how to teach kids," Principal Jaime Rivera said.

Rivera praised Noel as an effective, enthusiastic teacher to whom both students and teachers turn. Noel's qualities got him nominated last year to represent the district as Arizona's Teacher of the Year.

"He aspires to do everything better every year," Rivera said.